

Ralston Hall  
Ralston Avenue  
Belmont, San Mateo County  
California

HABS No. CAL-1674

HABS  
CAL.  
41-BELM

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
Planning and Service Center, Design and Construction  
450 Golden Gate Avenue  
San Francisco, California

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

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PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT  
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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RALSTON HALL

Belmont, San Mateo County, California

ADDRESS: Ralston Avenue, Belmont  
OWNER: College of Notre Dame, A Corporation  
OCCUPANT: College of Notre Dame  
USE: Women's Liberal Arts College

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Ralston Hall is one of the grandiose creations of a grandiose personality - William Chapman Ralston. Utilizing a modest villa, property of Count Cipriani in the 1850's and early 1860's, Ralston created a veritable Victorian palace here after buying the property in 1865. Largely built in the late 1860's, the house and grounds were constantly embellished until Ralston's mysterious death in 1875. Passing to his former partner, Senator William Sharon, the house was later sold to a Mrs. Bull who made it into a girls' school. Then, it became a private sanitarium run by Dr. Gardiner. In 1922, the Sisters of Notre Dame purchased the property for the College of Notre Dame and began conversion of the house to their uses. Carefully, they have gradually rehabilitated the mansion. Ralston Hall was stylistically a modified Italian Villa; but its rambling growth and present stripped exterior make exact categorization difficult. Like its creator, Ralston, the house reflected a mercurial variety and additive opulence. Its interiors are remarkable on a national scale of values, and incorporate many unusual features of both construction and decoration.

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## HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The earliest history of the Belmont property is not easily deciphered. This wooded land in the foothills of the Coast Range had attracted the eye of Captain George Vancouver, near the turn of the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> Later it was in the hands of a S. M. Mezes, a patentee of the Pulgas Ranch. Governor John McDougal also is said to have been an occupant. Sometime in the 1850's, emigre' Italian Count Cipriani built a modest villa in what had been known as the Canyon or Canada del Diablo (because of strong local winds). Cipriani went back to Italy to participate in the Independence movement, but returned to Belmont in the early 1860's.<sup>2</sup> He finally left Belmont for good in 1865; it was then that Ralston purchased the estate.

William Chapman Ralston (born 1826 in Ohio) had made his fortune in the silver mining bonanzas of the 1860's. Like many of his contemporaries he desired not only an opulent city mansion but a large country estate - which in Ralston's case became his real home. Like his contemporaries (Mills, etc.), he bought on the Peninsula, south of San Francisco, in a setting of sun and tranquility - away from the cosmopolitan but chill charms of San Francisco. After acquisition of the property, Ralston immediately began construction of an increasingly grand house, incorporating the modest villa of Cipriani. By 1867, there was accommodation for thirty guests; by 1868, for over a hundred. Ralston embarked on ambitious water and gas projects.<sup>3</sup> At the time of his death, the appraised value of the estate was \$250,000; but the actual cost must have been considerably above this.

Always a regal host, Ralston delighted in driving his guests to Belmont at break-neck speeds, in four horse char-a-bancs that attempted to beat rail time with strategic relay systems, for evening or week-end parties.<sup>4</sup> Arriving at the estate, as many as fifty or more guests were met by Mrs. Ralston and the servants. As with so many of the later Victorians, Ralston had an immense appetite for the good things of life, and wanted friends and acquaintances to share (and be impressed by) them. The "Lovely Lizzie" (Elizabeth Fry) Ralston apparently longed for occasional evenings en famille, but Ralston considered the Belmont house a kind of outpost of his great new Palace Hotel in San Francisco - in construction in the mid 1870's. New and more luxurious features were added constantly

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to building and grounds at Belmont.<sup>5</sup> A dining room for a hundred, a great mirrored ballroom, lavishly appointed stables and carriage house, superb lawns and planting, a fine row of trees lining the entrance drive and abating afternoon winds of the area - all flowed with freedom/<sup>from</sup> the apparently endless Ralston purse. Design of the house is traditionally attributed to Henry Cleaveland of San Francisco (architect of the Palace Hotel), but many features undoubtedly reflect Ralston's own ideas and innovations.

Unfortunately, although Ralston was a brilliant promoter and a man of large capabilities in many areas, he overextended himself. His involvements in a legion of financial schemes and projects such as the Palace Hotel led to dangerous and unethical use of funds from his Bank of California. The Bank of California had to close its doors temporarily; the panic toppled all of Ralston's dreams. Swimming off what is now Aquatic Park, San Francisco, in 1875, Ralston drowned - and no one was certain if it were accidental or suicide. Mr. William Sharon, his partner and closest business associate, inherited all liabilities and assets. Senator Sharon always claimed that Ralston's liabilities erased assets, but Sharon emerged from the "adjustment" an even wealthier man than before as well as the owner of the Belmont estate, the Palace Hotel, etc.

Mrs. Ralston and her two daughters moved out of the great house at Belmont, and Sharon occupied it in the later 1870's with his ill-starred mistress, Sarah Althea Hill, and his daughter Flora.<sup>6</sup> Flora's wedding to Lord Fermor-Hesketh of England was the last great social event at Belmont.

Eventually, the property went to Mrs. Alpheus Bull - widow of another Ralston associate. She made it into a girls' school called Radcliffe Hall. A little later, it was converted into a private sanitarium ("nerve asylum") by Dr. Gardiner.<sup>7</sup> From about 1912 on, it was in the care of a custodian and was empty. Finally, in 1922, the Sisters of Notre Dame at San Jose purchased the house and several acres (now about eighty-eight) for use as the College of Notre Dame for women. (The old Ralston home was called Berchman's Hall for a time, in honor of one of the founding sisters; it is now Ralston Hall.) First used as a dormitory and social center, Ralston Hall has gradually become an amiable replica of its former self. Slowly and carefully the Sisters have attempted to recreate something of the glory of Ralston's times. Many of the house's interior fittings were unspoiled in its

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various transformations of use; by judicious rehabilitation and some restoration, the effect now is approximately what it might have been on a "quiet day" in Ralston's era of glory.<sup>8</sup>

NOTES (Historical Information)

1. See Federal Writers Project, California, pp. 371-372, and its source - Hoover and Rensch, p. 319.
2. Cipriani was a Corsican. His first name is sometimes given as Lussetti or Aconetto, although Leonetto is correct. For his many journeys to and from California, and an account of his varied accomplishments in Europe and the United States, see Ernest Falbo's translation of Cipriani's Diaries. The books title page refers to the Belmont house, but there is nothing in the presently "chopped" text about it.
3. Ralston constructed a dam nearby, and had numerous cisterns on his estate for fire protection. (One such cistern, under the house, undoubtedly gave rise to the story of an underground lake, a la Ludwig of Bavaria's Wagnerian cave-lake, for special guests at Belmont.) The gas works, costing originally about \$50,000, were an early instance of a private utility utilized by the public (of Belmont town), as well.
4. Atherton, California, p. 273, calls it "an immense, rambling French-looking structure" but its character is distinctly Italianate not Second Empire French, on the exterior; the grand stair vaguely suggests the Paris Opera.
5. The name of Belmont is variously ascribed to Portia's villa (Merchant of Venice) or Belmont, New York. It may have also received the name of Belmonte from Cipriani.
6. Some sources say that Mrs. Ralston and her children moved to "Little" Belmont - formerly, in part, a servants' residence. The families of both Ralston and Sharon are understandably vague about this period in the property's history.
7. Various spelled Gardener, Gardner and Gardiner in the sources; the latter seems most correct.

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8. Only a few pieces of furniture survived (including an elegant Hawaiian koa wood grand piano), but most of the chandeliers, a few of the door knobs, and almost all of the hardware and glass of the innumerable doors, etc., are original.

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#### ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Ralston Hall was built of redwood, on a stone foundation; the entire structure was carefully engineered to avoid earthquake damage. The stone was quarried locally, and was also used in the structurally progressive carriage house and stable building - as well as in many other parts of the estate for various retaining walls, etc. The house was painted white during Ralston's era. When the Sisters of Notre Dame purchased the property in 1922, they decided to remove much of the wooden trim on the exterior and stucco the entire building for easier maintenance; the stucco is now painted a warm rose-tan.

The entrance drive leads up to a porte-cochere in front of the main entrance. (This porte-cochere is continued into a kind of Italian Villa tower in the upper stories.) Almost all of the characteristic wooden decorative detail has been removed from the exterior, and since the house was built in an additive, rambling fashion, the total effect is not distinctly indicative of any specific 19th century style. On the side facing the carriage house and stables a few details of the late Italianate, early Eastlake style still remain on porches or windows. But it is the interior of Belmont which merits most attention today.

That interior is of extraordinary ingenuity and decorative richness. The plan is centered on a foyer and stair hall, which lie directly inside the main door of the porte-cochere.<sup>1</sup> (Placed on a high basement, the first or main level is reached by a considerable flight of stairs from the driveway at front; in the rear, the level of the land places rooms at that side more directly on "ground level".) The principal features of the first floor are a long double sun-parlor to the left of the entrance, which was modeled on the promenade deck of a Mississippi River boat, with a long narrow dining room and reception

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rooms to the left of the stair hall and various parlors, sun-parlors, etc., and a massive ballroom to the right of the foyer and stair hall. All of the floors (with the exception of one parlor, floored in cedar) are of walnut, maple and mahogany, and are remarkably well preserved in all their patterned vibration of "color".

Henry Cleaveland may have seen photographs of the Paris Opera House (in construction at the same time as Belmont); but the stair hall at Ralston's estate is said to have owed its form to Mrs. Ralston - notably the opera box mezzanine-balcony which encircles the top of the stairs at the second floor. Throughout, also, there are reminiscences of the spacious movement of interiors on the great stern-wheel river boats. Much of the flow of space, made possible at Belmont by a truly prodigal use of glass doors and curtain walls - not to mention the equally extensive use of mirror, recalls the unimpeded interiors of those floating palaces which marked a new high in American structural brilliance and a new low in decorative confusion.

All of the decorative door and window glass is said to have been imported from Italy; and the chandeliers are traditionally ascribed to Central European craftsmen (of what is now Czechoslovakia). Whatever the specific source, the glass is prodigiously rich and, even more surprisingly, perfectly preserved with the exception of one great pier glass - cracked irregularly. The lofty wooden doors with their large cut and etched glass panels open from room to room; between Ralston's reception room and the dining room there is a complete wall of glass which slides up into a recess between the walls of two floors. It was Ralston's pleasure to receive his guests (Mrs. Ralston received at the top of the main stair hall, on the guests' arrival, and assigned them to their rooms) before dinner and then dramatically cause this curtain wall to be elevated like some glorious theater set to reveal the sumptuously laid table and serried servants, ready to serve.<sup>2</sup>

Between the dining room and the stair hall, all of the "windows" could be raised to open the dining hall out into this intermediate space before the dancing began - in the mirrored ballroom on the far side of the stair hall. (There is only one major floor sill on the first floor - directly to the right of the entrance; it was obviously Ralston's intention to make his house completely "open", in both the social and structural sense of that word.)

No verbal description can do justice to the glass doors, particularly to the curved doors which divide Ralston's reception room from the



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so-called "half-moon" room - that leads out to the side entrance and the carriage house. These curved doors (sometimes called "Orange Peel" doors, popularly) were again a suggestion from the river boats; they were made in a special steam room on the front lawn at Belmont, and their fitting is as precise today as when they were first installed. All of the metal parts of the principal reception rooms at Belmont were silverplated, including hinges for regular doors and those that open two ways (dated as patented as 1867).

In the ballroom, there are fourteen mirrors (nine large pier glasses and five wall mirrors in the musician's alcove) to carry on the glassy openness of effect. Three great chandeliers, originally made for gas but now converted to electricity, illuminated the ballroom.<sup>3</sup> On this side of the house, toward the front are additional parlors and sun-parlors (possibly a breakfast room). The elaborate pargetted ceilings are untouched by time; and one parlor still has its attractive hand-painted frescoes. Belmont's main stair rises to a second floor mezzanine-balcony which overlooks the stairs and hall below; the balcony is designed to resemble a set of opera boxes with silver plated railings and was used for discerning study of the guests. Paired Ionic columns support the ingenious sky-light and "perforated" ceiling. (Both the stair hall, dining room, and other main gathering areas, where temperatures might rise, are ventilated with pierced wood panels inserted strategically into the ceiling.)

Originally there were some eighty two rooms at Belmont. The necessities of new uses have caused some conversion and a constant change of interior furnishings.<sup>4</sup> Linoleum covers the former areas of carpeting on the upper floors; and fire doors have reduced the open effect of the lofty staircases rising three or four floors, interiorly, to service bedrooms and other upper spaces. Ralston had intended an art gallery for the area above the ballroom; two curving stairs lead up behind the ballroom itself. The exigencies of time and his premature death kept this from fruition. At the upper levels in the rear, balustraded gangplanks used to lead (beneath variegated awning coverings) to attractive garden terraces on the hillside behind the house. For guests of the period, it must have seemed like some cross between a Saratoga hotel and Xanadu, for Ralston had created effects which were extraordinarily dramatic and socially "self-enhancing". As a symbol of a time of ardent egotism, nothing could more persuasively render homage to the artificial image of nouveau-riche American society than the coruscating flicker of light and flow of space, with endless reduplication of that image in mirrors, unique to Belmont in all the great California homes of the silver age.

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The carriage house and stable is the most impressive building on the estate today, beyond the house proper. Its unusually open interior was made possible by a suspended ceiling of edge-laid oak, held up by cables; the shell of the building was largely of fine local stone, laid random for the walls and more carefully cut and fitted for major openings. This was reputed to have cost \$80,000, with its inlaid mahogany stables (enriched with mother of pearl, solid silver pegs and monogrammed horse trappings of silver).

#### NOTES (Architectural Information)

1. The arched entrance is somewhat related to the entrance of the Palace Hotel; and the stair hall with its curious opera-like balconies is obviously a prefiguration of the tiered splendors of the Palace Courtyard.
2. Two minor but interesting features of the dining room are a large wall safe for the silver and an arrestingly modern-looking clock on the great mirror of the main side-board (here built-in on the long side of the room opposite the glass curtain wall). The kitchens have been completely changed; but storage areas and a stair to the cellar (and old wine cellar) remain between dining room and present kitchen area.
3. Their survival is one of the minor miracles of Ralston Hall. A curved alcove seat, intended for the far end of the ballroom, was discovered in storage in the carriage house and is now again in its original location. There are handsome wood consoles beneath the pier glasses; and the patterned dance floor remains eloquent today. (It is similar to the floor in the main reception and ballroom of the Crocker Art Gallery, in Sacramento.) Square nails in the hand laid floors were capped with wood pegs. Motifs on the cut and etched doors are generally foliate or fruit, with occasional mythical subjects.
4. By as judicious editing of gifts as possible, the Sisters of Notre Dame have furnished the main floor in a high proportion of Victorian pieces appropriate to the house's period. Most of the coverings are modern; as is true on the second floor mezzanine-balcony also. A period bedroom is now being planned.

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SITE

Ralston Hall occupies an elevated site at the end of a long drive lined with cedars, pines and eucalypti - and backs up against the side of a hill. Much of the former Ralston property is now covered with the College of Notre Dame's academic buildings, but the area around the former home is handsomely maintained with old and new plantings to enhance the building.

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January 1966

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Ralston Avenue  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

ADDENDUM  
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Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

ADDENDUM TO  
RALSTON HALL  
(RALSTON-SHARON HOUSE)  
Ralston Avenue  
Belmont  
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